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Towards a Theory of Activity Led Learning for Progressive Criticality in a Complex World (0241)

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Abstract

In response to the challenges of a performative and complex environment many staff within higher education are promoting active or activity led learning curricula that aim to prepare learners for life-long learning and the world of work. This paper suggests that a model proposed by Barnett and Coate (2005) should be embraced as the foundational principle on which activity led learning curricula should be based. This model proposes a formulation of modern curricula in which learners are placed firmly at its centre as human beings who are engaged in forming identities founded on three interrelated domains, those of knowledge, action and self. A focus on these three domains provides the basis for curriculum designers to interrogate their designs in terms of the extent to which they support holistic learner development and engage students in progressive criticality.

[136 words]

Introduction

Educators are faced with the challenge of operating in an increasingly performative and complex higher education environment but nevertheless one in which learners need to be supported in developing as critical beings (Barnett, 1997). In response many staff in higher education are adopting active learning approaches the anticipated benefits of which are captured below:

Learning in a passive system has a much greater tendency to be both superficial and quickly forgotten. Active involvement in learning helps the student to develop the skills of self-learning while at the same time contributing to a deeper, longer lasting knowledge of the theoretical material.....[and] ...it is almost the only effective way to develop professional skills and to realise the integration of material from different sources.

(McCowan and Knapper, 2002, p.633)

However what is the foundational principle or model through which such active learning curricula might be understood, designed, 'delivered' and evaluated? This paper argues that new challenges require new developments that involve a more flexible formulation of curricula that are also appropriately theoretically underpinned. These new developments are informed by early developments in professional education (Barrows and Tamblyn, 1980) that increased the use of pedagogies such as problem-based learning (PBL). They build on this work and the clear benefits of approaches like PBL (Savin-Baden, 2000; Strobel and van Barneveld, 2009) as well as others such work-based learning. They note that the emerging challenges that need to be addressed include those of supercomplexity (Barnett, 2000) where knowledge no longer exists in disciplinary silos to be transmitted to students but is constructed 'in action' requiring workers to be 'flexible', 'adaptable' and 'self-reliant' and the teacher to be a facilitator who participates in inquiry rather than operating as the authoritative expert.

Thus this paper suggests that such influences require a formulation of curriculum for higher education that engages with these challenges and prepares students more effectively for life-long learning and the world of work. Such an approach embraces the model of Barnett

and Coate (2005) which is based on an understanding of modern curricula as one in which learners are firmly located at its centre forming identities founded in three domains: those of knowledge, action and self.

It is argued here Activity Led Learning (ALL), delineated below is a practical outworking of this model proposed by Barnett and Coate.

Activity Led Learning principles

Two fundamental principles are that learning is organised around activities rather than content, and the tutor acts as facilitator. Thus the activity (for example a problem, an inquiry, or a simulation) is the starting point for the learning process and determines its overall direction. Activities allow content to be related to context which supports student motivation and comprehension. In Fink's terms they provide for significant learning experiences (Fink, 2003) and provide the stimulus that the learner or group of learners need to tap into their intrinsic motivation and their capacity for self-regulated learning. The learning process itself requires "a self directed ... process in which the individual learner, or team of learners, seek and apply knowledge, skilful practices, ... and resources (personal and physical) relevant to the activity [being undertaken]." (Wilson-Medhurst *et al.*, 2008, p.2).

ALL is an approach designed to improve students' engagement in learning, and is currently being developed in a UK faculty (Wilson-Medhurst *et al.*, 2008). Various forms of active learning are embraced within ALL curricula including: problem-based learning, action learning, project-based learning, problem-solving learning, as for example compared in Savin-Baden and Major, 2004. In these as in all forms of ALL there is a shift from a demand for mere know-how and propositional knowledge to learning that demands degrees of criticality (Barnett, 1997). As Barnett argues:

"Criticality can be achieved in three domains, those of knowledge, the self and the world. [...] ...the educator's task is not complete unless the student is challenged continually to make connections between her knowledge, self-understanding and actions at the highest levels of criticality [...]. ...in this integration at the highest levels of creative critique, would we have the prospect of higher education becoming a site where critical being adequate to the wider world might be fostered." (Barnett, 1997, p.114-115).

It is suggested here that ALL is the means to challenge students to make these connections between knowledge, self-understanding and actions at *all levels* of criticality. It also allows for a diverse student body and diverse learning contexts.

ALL – a pedagogy for engagement

ALL might therefore be characterised as a pedagogy for engagement with progressive criticality (Barnett 2007). Similar arguments have been made for utilising PBL to support the development of progressive criticality (Savin-Baden and Major, 2004). Key to the arguments presented in this paper is the focus on utilising *activities*, including problems, within flexible ALL curricula to engage students in all the domain areas for progressive criticality.

Key challenges of utilising ALL in the UK and elsewhere seem to relate to combating the 'knowledge first' tradition within many disciplines which skews curriculum design, as well as the demands of a modular system. The faculty represented in this paper is in the process of implementing and refining ALL curricula within all of its undergraduate programmes. Evaluations of its initial pilot of a level 1 first six-week integrative activity-led experience were promising (Green and Wilson-Medhurst, 2009) as were subsequent cross-faculty level 1 implementations, evaluated as outlined in Wilson-Medhurst, 2010. External funding has

been awarded to support aspects of this development and evaluation work which is on-going.

This paper will present this model of curriculum design, relating it to the work of Barnett and Coate, 2005 and following students' feedback from the first year will elaborate on the extent to which the implementation successfully promoted learning in the three domains of knowledge, action and self. It will also explore the extent to which integration across the domains was/could be supported so early in the curriculum. In the light of this evidence the presentation will review the effectiveness of the Barnett and Coate model as a foundational principle upon which ALL curricula should be based.

[998 words]

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